SUCCESSFUL CHRISTIAN
October 16, 2005

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 99
Matthew 23:1–12

"The greatest among you will be your servant."
Matthew 23:11 (NRSV)

It's never too late to get on with it. . . . We have permission to amend life at any time,
whether we're 35, 45, or 75. . . . Faith is always going to be demanding something of you.
It is not a cold compress or a warm footbath or a cup of tea. Faith is always stretching your "is" against your "ought." It is a consolation—
it strengthens you to do what you must do—but it is also a provocation,
a stimulus to become the person you really want to be.

Peter Gomes

In his memoir, *The Good Times*, former *New York Times* correspondent Russell Baker remembers his mother in a way that made me smile. She has been gone for years, but his mother still roams free in his head and wakes him in the early morning before daybreak. "If there's one thing I can't stand, Russell, it's a quitter," she says. He protests, "But mother, I'm not a child anymore. I have made something of myself. I'm entitled to sleep late." "Russell," she responds, "You've got no more gumption than a bump on a log. Don't you want to amount to something?"

Baker remembers when he was assigned to cover the White House—as close to heaven as correspondent could get. At twenty-nine, he was puffed up with pride and went to see his mother, relishing the prospect of her approval and delight. He should have known better.

"Well, Russ," she said, "if you work hard at this White House job you might be able to make something of yourself" (pp. 1–3).

"Make something of yourself." "Amount to something." "Be a success." What does it mean? How can I achieve it? How can I be a success? Does my faith, my religion have anything to say about it."

It is our obsession, success is: “the biggest American preoccupation.” That’s one of the conclusions in a new book on the topic, *Just Enough: Tools for Creating Success in Your Work and Life* by Laura Nash. Nash is Senior Research Fellow at Harvard Business School and, before that, Project Director at Harvard Divinity School’s Center for the Study of Values in Public Life.

“Just Enough” is Professor Nash’s new definition of success, success that translates into the experience of satisfaction, which most success does not. In fact, the biggest misconception about success is that “achieving it will automatically bring satisfaction.” It doesn’t. “Nothing will be enough and success will never satisfy,” she concludes. What success does bring, more often than not, is anxiety—anxiety that I won’t be able to keep up, that I’ll lose it all, that something terrible might happen to my business or the market or to me. That kind of anxiety actually stifles creativity.

Nash did extensive research with successful people, “High Achievers,” which produced some surprising discoveries. When nearing retirement and asked what they wanted to do next, high-achieving men answered in terms of another achievement: “I’ll get really good at golf.” Many women high achievers, Nash discovered, responded, “I’ll clean my closets, create some order and a space in my life for reflection,” an approach that is clearly more healthy.

Professor Nash offers four components of true success:

1. Happiness, enjoyment—which almost universally derives from human relationships
2. Achievement—hard work, devotion, self-sacrifice toward the end of doing well, whatever you are doing
3. Significance—counting to others, making a difference somewhere, somehow
4. Legacy—not about how you will be remembered but about how some important part of you will continue to help others. (*Journal of Financial Planning*, May 2005)

In our text this morning, a new definition of success begins to emerge out of the teachings of Jesus. I like to think of those teachings in terms of an alternate reality in which followers of Jesus live. He taught his followers to live in the world with a new set of rules, with a new vocabulary, with new definitions for common words. He called this alternative reality the kingdom of God, and he said it is present on earth when ordinary people, like them—like us—live it out.

Near the end of his life, Jesus taught his followers a new definition of success. He used as a foil an example of what he did not mean, some people

who, by any definition, were successful: wealthy, influential, important, respected, highly successful. What he said about them is often interpreted as a critique of their Jewish practices. The scribes and Pharisees, he said, in their piety are a burden to everyone. They love the attention they receive. They wear big phylacteries, the leather straps around their forehead and arms, and long fringe on their robes—both symbols of devotion to the law of God. Jesus had no argument with the practice. He must have worn a phylactery himself. It was what was going on beneath the surface. They enjoyed too much their position. They played to it, postured. They defined success this way, by the admiration their piety generated.

The alternate reality—the truth, the saving truth, Jesus taught them that day—is the opposite to what you are seeing:

> "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Jesus was not opposed to success. In fact, Jesus called his followers to a rigorous life of hard work and selfless devotion and self-sacrifice. He called his men and women to be successful by a different definition: by giving life away, by dying a little, by serving others, humbly, faithfully, selflessly.

Does that really work out there? "Nice guys finish last," Leo Durocher, used to say. Can you live by Jesus' definition of success in the real world?

James Autry, former CEO of the Meredith Corporation who wrote a book a few years ago, *Love and Profit*, thinks so. He remembers sitting in a sales meeting led by a very aggressive, in-your-face sales manager who said, "This is a war. It's about beating the competition." I'm into winning," she said, "so let's get out there and kick a little [you know what]!"

Good, successful management, Autry suggests, is about love. "If you don't care about people, get out of management before it is too late. Save yourself a heart attack and save many people a lot of daily grief" (pp.13–17).

The Vice President for Human Resources in a successful corporation, Autry says, should be renamed the Vice President for Caring. "Good management begins with caring about, listening to, paying attention to, serving people you are trying to manage." Good managers remember birthdays, know about weddings and the birth of children. Successful managers attend to and serve the individuals they are managing.

While I was preparing this sermon, a friend sent me a copy of a commencement speech Steve Jobs delivered at Stanford University last spring. Some of you may know that I'm not exactly on the cutting edge of

I.T. (that's Information Technology), so the name Steve Jobs was only vaguely familiar to me. He is monumentally successful. In fact, there he was last Thursday, on the front page of the Business section of the *Times*, in black slacks and turtleneck, introducing some marvelous new iPod that can do about everything and that everybody but me will pull out and plug in on the airplane.

His speech to the Stanford graduates is fascinating. Jobs dropped out of college after a few weeks because he thought it was a waste of his parents' hard-earned money; slept on the floor of friends' dorm rooms, returned bottles for the five-cent deposit to buy food, and walked seven miles every Sunday to a Hare Krishna temple for a hot meal. He started Apple at twenty in his parents' garage; grew it to a multibillion dollar company; hired a manager, who fired him at the age of thirty. He was devastated, humiliated, a very public failure.

Gradually, however, he realized that his failure had not changed anything about him. He was still in love with what he did and so started again. He concluded that "the heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of beginning again." He fell in love, married, started a family and a new business. And then, in a routine physical exam, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, almost surely terminal. He was told, "Go home and get your affairs in order," which is doctors' code for "prepare to die."

A subsequent biopsy revealed that his cancer was treatable. He had the recommended surgery and is fine now, but different, with a whole new notion of what success is.

He told the Stanford graduates that he looks in the mirror every day and asks, "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today? Whenever the answer is 'no' for too many days I know I have to change something." He has learned what the psalmist meant when he said, "Number your days." "Remembering I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important."

"Your time is limited," he said. "Don't waste it."

At the heart of our faith as Christians, followers of Jesus, is a commitment to live our lives on the basis of his teachings and the truth that we believe he represents. And at the very core of that truth is that notion that the very highest, holiest purpose of life is to give it away in love, that true greatness —true success, as Jesus defines it—is in serving others. A successful man or woman, in whatever work you do, is one who knows that and lives it. A

successful church is a congregation of his followers who, together, live out the truth in their common service in the world.

Together, St. Paul, once said, they become a letter of Christ to the world, a love letter actually.

It is stewardship time, which means that churches everywhere are talking about budgets and pledging and giving and are investing a lot of time and energy pleading, begging, cajoling their members. Douglas John Hall calls it the “Annual Drum Banging” for money. The issue is not simply raising money. Every year I remember what a mentor of mine, Winburn Thomas, used to say: namely that if all this is about is raising money, save yourself a lot of trouble and raffle a Pontiac. This stewardship business is really about how you and I live our lives and what definition of successful living will guide us.

Martin Marty, who is seventy-seven, said recently that he still loves what he is doing so much that he has never taken a sabbatical. He says that he and his wife like to say that these are the best years. The only problem is that there are not as many of them left.

Marty has come across a new study of religion and life expectancy that has discovered “weekly attendance at a religious service is associated with increased survival and a boosted immune system.” Marty says, only partly in jest, “I guess I should spend my first post-retirement sabbatical sitting in a church pew.”

I thought about what a great Stewardship approach that might make. Instead of our wonderful theme—“You are a letter of Christ” —how about “Come to church and live longer?” or, even better, “Give a lot of money and live a really long time.”

And every year I remember what a friend used to say annually around stewardship time. He chaired the campaign once and wondered whether we couldn’t resurrect the idea of indulgences—money given to the church reduces your time is purgatory—maybe the best stewardship idea ever. “Couldn’t you just say that if they raise their pledges, you’ll get them into heaven?” he asked.

We can’t do that. No one can make that promise.

What I can promise is what Jesus promised: that giving will save your life, that serving others will make you a success by the only measurement that ultimately matters.

The most haunting words ever said to me were by Jay Walters, who was the pastor of my home church when I was in divinity school. I talked to him frequently. He took good care of my mother when my father died. He was, and is, a good man. When it came time for my ordination, I asked Jay to deliver the charge to the new pastor, the time in ordination when an older, experienced veteran gets to tell a new minister what he or she needs to know. Jay knew me well. He knew more about me than I realized at the time. He talked about success as a minister and how tempting it is to measure yourself and your church by the same benchmarks the world uses: size, money, power and influence. He said ministers who yield to that temptation end up like the circus performer who sets a plate spinning on a spindle, then another and another, until he has a whole row of spinning plates. And then the first slows down and wobbles and he runs to it and gives it another spin, and then the next. And your success model demands that you just keep running to keep those plates spinning.

Jay looked me in the eye, sitting there in the front pew with my new robe on and my career ahead of me—he knew me so well—and said, “John, Jesus Christ does not call you to be successful. He calls you to be faithful.”

“The greatest among you will be your servant,” Jesus said.

Parents who devote themselves to their children.

Sons and daughters who give their lives caring for an aging parent.

Wife/husband sitting, with patience and love, by the bedside of a sick spouse.

Teacher, tutor, care team member, hospital volunteer, loyal friend, compassionate colleague.

You, me, as we give our love, our time, our energy, our money to what we most deeply cherish and believe, and in the process learn the only true secret of success: to give our lives away in his name and for his sake.

The one who said,

“If you lose your life for my sake you will find it”

and

“The greatest among you will be your servant.”

Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.